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ABSTRACT

Learning to communicate in English is an essential tool to access many resources via worldwide networks in the global society. Like students from many other countries, students in Taiwan study English for years, but lack opportunities to practice. For English-as-a-Second-Language students, the World Wide Web provides a learning environment in which language skills can be developed through communication with native speakers of English. A framework, the Online American Culture Learning Center, was created to study cross cultural distance education through the Web. This experiment between Kent State University (Ohio) and the National Taiwan Normal University will create an English learning environment through the discussion of six major topics on the Internet: Thanksgiving, Yellowstone National Park, American Football, Rock 'n Roll, Shopping Malls, and Garage Sales. Training materials for these topics are being used in a pilot study to assess their efficiency. Preservice teachers from Kent State University will serve as tutors and monitor student progress. Each tutor will have one student, who will correspond via e-mail. The project will explore whether online distance education can enhance learning in a foreign language and whether such exchanges promote multicultural understanding. Evaluation questions will be administered online, and surveys from students and tutors will be used to assess the feasibility of the approach. (SLD)

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Online English Learning Using Internet for English-as-A-Foreign-Language Students

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Statement of the Problem

Demographics of the student population in higher education have undergone a significant shift in recent years. Increasingly, part-time and older, non-traditional students are entering higher education, including growing numbers of women, minorities, the disabled, full time employees, rural residents, low-income students, and retired people searching for life-long learning opportunities (Holloway & Ohler, 1995). These students often require special learning conditions and are much more critical of demands on their time. Because of demands for flexibility in curriculum content and scheduling of courses, traditional educational settings are often inadequate to provide services for this student pool. As a result, colleges and universities are examining ways in which computer-based technologies may help to provide alternatives.

The promise of technology-based post-secondary educational solutions is especially great in international education. English is the current international language and is an essential tool to access abundant resources via worldwide networks in the global society. Furthermore, learning to communicate in English properly is important in facilitating international interactive communications.

In Taiwan, students study English starting from seventh grade. Although they spend 10 years learning English, most college graduates still find they have less than fluent English skills. An ongoing problem in learning any foreign language is the lack of an environment where new language skills can be applied. Some learners may opt for travel to English-speaking countries to

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continue their learning. Others hire English-speaking tutors. Obviously, the economics of either solution places the acquisition of English skills at a premium and therefore beyond the reach of most students.

A Feasible Solution of the Problem

How can these international students apply new language skills effectively and affordably? Advances in the Internet and World Wide Web (WWW) can provide some solutions. The cost of computing equipment has decreased rapidly, while worldwide computing networks are becoming increasingly sophisticated. The World Wide Web has provided a convenient, popular, powerful, user-friendly, and cost-effective means of linking computers around the world. The Web is accessible on any computer system with an Internet connection. Both students in Taiwan and tutors in United States are able to access WWW through a client browser at their convenience. For English-as-second-language (ESL) students, the World Wide Web provides a learning environment in which language skills can be developed by direct written communication with native speakers of English. Therefore, the WWW has provided an ideal medium for powerful and user-friendly interactive distance learning. The proliferation of the Internet and the WWW in Taiwan facilitates this kind of extension in online education.

A Prototype of Computerized Online English Learning Environment

For actual immersion in an English-learning environment, a framework, called *the Online American Culture Learning Center*, was created to study cross-cultural distance education via the WWW. This experiment between Kent State University and National Taiwan Normal University

is aimed at creating an "English learning environment" on the Internet through the presentation of a variety of aspects of American culture. Six major topics are included: Thanksgiving, Yellowstone National Park, American Football, Rock 'n' Roll, Shopping Malls, and Garage Sales. These topics are intended to involve students in experiencing American culture and motivate them.

All electronic text, teaching materials, and feedback data, including information sent and received, are stored in an Internet Web server, http://amethyst.educ.kent.edu:2369. A mirror site also exists in Taiwan to avoid heavy Internet traffic between the United States and Taiwan. These sites are accessible by both students in Taiwan and tutors in America. HyperText Markup Language (HTML), CGI (common gateway interface), and the Internet programming language Java were used in developing these materials. These sites contain multimedia materials including text, animation, pictures, images, sound, and digital video.

The materials begin with pretest. After all the answers to the pretest have been gathered, the required reading is posted. Hyper-linked information is provided to give learners contextual support. The multimedia is designed to be attractive and provides additional relevant contextual information.

The Pilot Project

Currently, these training materials are being used in a pilot study to assess their efficiency. Pre-service student teachers from Kent State University will serve as tutors. Their major function will be to monitor student progress. Email is used to enhance communication between the American tutor and assigned tutees in Taiwan. Tutees will be college students at National Taiwan

Normal University. Each tutee will have a corresponding American tutor. In addition to following the lesson content, tutees will correspond with their tutor via email. The electronic "pen pal" interaction may become more significant for English learning.

Intended Outcomes of the Project

With this data, outcomes of the project will address the following research questions: (1) Does online distance education enhance learning in foreign language? (2) Does online distance education improve distance learners' attitudes toward education? (3) Does establishing academic exchanges promote multi-culture understanding?

For this experiment, a variety of survey questionnaires have been designed to measure the effectiveness of the project. All dependent measures will be administered online. Pretests and identical post-tests are designed to examine the effectiveness of the learning. In addition, each tutee will be requested to write a paragraph prior to and after all six lessons. This writing sample will be evaluated to compare the degree of improvement in English skills. After all the six lessons, each tutee will be asked to evaluate the whole project via online questionnaires. Specific evaluation criteria include: (1) whether a tutee has a clearer picture of some aspects of American life; (2) whether these lessons motivate the tutee to learn English; (3) whether the design of these lessons is user-friendly; (4) whether the email exchange between the tutor and tutee promotes multi-cultural understanding; (5) whether the Internet is an appropriate tool in learning English remotely. Each tutor's reaction toward her or his experience with the tutee will also be surveyed. Surveys collected from both students and tutors will be used to analyze the potentials of this emerging computer-mediated communications.

Reference

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